

Why Involve Community Groups and Grassroots Practitioners?

Why should a College which is developing a Community Change curriculum involve community groups and grassroots practitioners? What contributions can they make to developing the program? How can they be involved most effectively?

The first of these questions is the easiest one. Obviously people who are already working at the grassroots level know what the issues are and have a strong sense of what kind of staff and other help they need. They have a lot of practical experience in the challenges of building a powerful organization and tackling the issues which matter most to them. The perspectives of both community leaders and professional organizers and other staff who are doing much of the daily work are both invaluable. The planning process will be far stronger if they are engaged as full partners in identifying the skills, knowledge, traits, vision and values which graduates of the program should develop.

Local groups and practitioners are also invaluable in -

- developing broad community support which can help convince an institution to develop a Change Education program (in some cities the initiative for creating such a program has come from the community);
- recruiting and screening good, committed candidates from the community for admission into the program;
- providing good field placements and learning situations for students;
- having good mentors on staff;
- being potential employers for graduates.; and
- being potential adjunct faculty or co-teachers

The key to capitalizing on these assets is to build a genuine partnership of equals between the community and the institution. Such partnerships are rare but possible. Typically, the massive power, resources and prestige of a college overwhelms grassroots groups and leads, at best, to a community being only minimally involved and having little influence. What's needed is a real partnership with strong mutual respect, common goals and shared authority (see Powerpoint below)